A Study on the Spatial Support Mechanisms of Transitional Space Layout for Neighborhood Social Interaction in Low-Rise Row Housing in Cebu City, Philippines

Wen Fang[1]

[1] Sultan Kudarat State University, Tacurong City, 9800, Philippines

Correspondence: Wen Fang, Sultan Kudarat State University, Tacurong City, 9800, Philippines.

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of transitional space layouts in shaping neighborhood-level social interaction within low-rise row housing developments in Cebu City, Philippines. Drawing on field-based observations, design analysis, and cultural insights, the study explores how spatial elements such as front yards, alleys, and shared courtyards function as social condensers in urban environments marked by high density and socio-cultural diversity. Findings highlight that the presence, configuration, and adaptability of transitional spaces are critical to fostering spontaneous encounters, collective identity, and informal governance mechanisms. The research demonstrates that cultural norms—particularly Filipino concepts such as *bayanihan* and *pakikisama*—are spatially enacted through semi-public zones that residents often appropriate and personalize. However, current housing policies and design practices frequently marginalize these spaces in favor of standardized layouts and densification goals. Through comparative analysis and policy critique, the study calls for a reframing of transitional zones as essential social infrastructure in the planning and evaluation of housing. It concludes by offering design and policy recommendations that promote culturally responsive and socially sustainable urban living environments.

Keywords: transitional space, Cebu City, informal urbanism

1. Introduction

Urban form plays a central role in shaping social relationships, particularly in the dense fabric of developing cities where space is limited and communities are diverse. One often-overlooked but profoundly influential element in urban design is the transitional space—zones that mediate between the private realm of the home and the public realm of streets and communal facilities. These in-between spaces include front yards, porches, stoops, narrow alleys, and shared courtyards, which serve not only as circulation paths but as vital social interfaces that foster spontaneous interaction, observation, cooperation, and collective identity formation.

In the context of low-rise row housing, where built density and compact footprints dominate, transitional spaces are especially important.

These spaces offer residents the opportunity to extend their domestic life outdoors, engaging neighbors and contributing to a sense of informal surveillance, belonging, and mutual care. Unlike high-rise developments that often suffer from anonymity and social isolation, low-rise communities have the latent spatial potential to foster strong interpersonal connections—provided that their design effectively incorporates social-supportive transitional zones.

This issue becomes particularly salient in Cebu City, Philippines, a secondary but rapidly urbanizing city where waves of internal migration, economic shifts, and disaster resettlement programs have driven the need for scalable, yet socially sensitive housing models. Many of these housing developments have emerged through public-private-NGO collaborations, such as those led by Gawad Kalinga (GK) and Habitat for Humanity Philippines (HfHP), both of which emphasize community involvement and participatory design in their principles (Mörnhed & Gehander, 2008). Yet, even within such people-centered frameworks, the actual spatial arrangements of transitional spaces often reflect a tension between standardization and cultural adaptability.

Cebu City's topography and socio-economic diversity add layers of complexity. The interaction between built form and social behavior varies significantly across different barangays (neighborhoods), where informal appropriation of space—through plantings, benches, laundry lines, or children's play areas—reveals the community's deep desire for spatial autonomy and social proximity. In recent assessments of post-disaster resettlement in both Tacloban and Cebu, it has been shown that design strategies which ignore the nuanced roles of transitional spaces risk undermining long-term community cohesion (Salang, 2020).

This essay critically examines how the layout and design of transitional spaces in Cebu's low-rise row housing projects either support or inhibit neighborhood social interaction. Drawing upon field-based case studies, urban design theory, and evaluation reports on resettlement housing, the discussion will unpack the mechanisms—spatial, behavioral, and cultural—that shape daily communal life. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of urban social

sustainability in Southeast Asian housing environments.

2. The Context of Low-Rise Row Housing in Cebu City

Cebu City, located in the Central Visayas region of the Philippines, has emerged as a key urban hub outside of Metro Manila, characterized by a booming BPO sector, increased internal migration, and fast-paced commercial expansion. As a result, the city has experienced rapid demographic shifts and intensified demand for accessible and affordable housing. This demand has been further exacerbated by environmental vulnerabilities, such as typhoons and flooding, which have displaced thousands of families over the past two decades. The pressure to house a growing and often socioeconomically marginalized population has led to the proliferation of low-rise row housing developments as a strategic urban intervention.

These low-rise row housing typologies—typically one- to two-story attached units organized in linear blocks—have been a popular choice due to their cost-effectiveness, relatively high land-use efficiency, and perceived capacity to support communal living. Major contributions to this housing form have come from collaborative initiatives involving local governments, international donors, and nonprofit actors, most notably Gawad Kalinga (GK) and Habitat for Humanity Philippines (HfHP). Both organizations emphasize "building not just houses, but communities", promoting values of solidarity, participatory construction, and local empowerment. The GK approach in particular often integrates "bayanihan" principles, whereby residents co-build and co-manage housing areas in a collective spirit (Mörnhed & Gehander, 2008).

Yet despite their social intentions, many of these developments face spatial challenges. The layout of these housing clusters tends to be standardized and top-down in design, often failing to adequately respond to the nuanced behaviors, cultural practices, and daily interaction patterns of Filipino residents. While the internal unit design may be sufficient for shelter, the spaces between homes—alleyways, front yards, narrow streets, and buffer zones—are frequently underutilized or insufficiently planned, compromising opportunities for spontaneous neighborly encounters, communal gatherings, and localized

governance.

Recent studies suggest that the quality of transitional spaces—those semi-public and semi-private zones that exist between a dwelling and the wider neighborhood—plays a pivotal role in shaping social capital and collective resilience within these communities. For instance, in post-disaster resettlement sites across Cebu and Tacloban, the absence of shaded walkways, gathering nooks, or multifunctional front spaces led to a decline in both daily interactions and residents' identification with their new environment (Salang, 2020). Informal adaptations by residents—such as adding benches, extending roofs, or creating makeshift gardens—reveal the latent social needs that often go unmet in the original architectural blueprint.

Cebu's informal urbanism must be considered as a contextual force. Even within formal housing sites, residents frequently blur the lines between private and public realms, reflecting a cultural orientation toward communal use of space. Children playing in front alleys, neighbors sharing meals on verandas, and elders socializing on street corners are all typical scenes in Filipino neighborhoods, underscoring the interactive potential of low-rise configurations—if appropriately designed.

Cebu City presents a complex yet fertile ground for evaluating how transitional spatial design can either hinder or enhance community interaction. As low-rise row housing becomes a dominant urban form for middle- to low-income populations, there is a pressing need to refine its spatial logic to accommodate not just physical dwellings, but the social life that makes these spaces truly livable and resilient.

3. Spatial Mechanisms of Transitional Zones

In low-rise row housing developments, particularly within urban environments like Cebu City, transitional spaces—those situated between private dwellings and public streets—serve as more than mere physical buffers. These semi-public, semi-private areas, such as front porches, narrow alleys, shared courtyards, and small front yards, operate as vital arenas of social engagement. They provide residents with the opportunity to step beyond the confines of their homes and into a space that encourages casual encounters, spontaneous dialogue, and cooperative behavior. However, these spaces are frequently underdesigned or misclassified in official site plans, often treated merely as circulation routes or setback requirements rather than as the essential social condensers they can become.

Recent housing projects in Cebu City have revealed that the deliberate design of these transitional spaces—through the provision of seating, shading structures, vegetation, and clearly defined edges—can dramatically increase their social utility. As highlighted by Magno-Ballesteros et al. (2024), the integration of human-scale elements not only encourages longer and more frequent use of these areas but also enhances informal interactions that are critical to building community trust and resilience. The value of transitional spaces lies not just in their physical presence but in their ability to mediate relationships, making them central to the success of any communal housing strategy.

Cultural norms in the Philippines further elevate the importance of these spaces. Concepts such as *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relationships) and *bayanihan* (community spirit) are deeply embedded in Filipino society, and transitional spaces act as the stage upon which these values are enacted. Whether used for early morning coffee, children's games, impromptu neighborhood meetings, or weekend cooking sessions, these in-between zones form the fabric of everyday life. Their role in facilitating intergenerational interaction, mutual support, and visibility cannot be overstated. In this context, the spatial configuration of housing developments must align not only with functional needs but also with deeply rooted social behaviors.

Different spatial arrangements lend themselves to varying levels of interaction. In Cebu's row housing developments, the linear front yard model typically features a narrow space between the house façade and the street. Though often modest in size, these front yards can be powerful social tools when adapted by residents with benches, flower pots, or hanging laundry, serving as informal nodes for neighborly exchange. The courtyard cluster model, where houses are organized around a central shared open space, supports group gatherings, children's play, and shared maintenance activities, creating a strong sense of micro-community. Meanwhile, alley-focused layouts offer intimate, high-contact spaces that can evolve into vibrant social corridors if

boundaries remain porous and residents feel collective ownership.

Where design has prioritized density or vehicular circulation over social functionality, these spaces become sterile and underutilized. Excessive enclosure, hard paving, lack of greenery, or poorly scaled proportions strip transitional spaces of their sociability. Conversely, when residents are granted or take liberties to personalize and adapt these areas—extending rooflines, adding semi-permanent seating, or decorating with cultural symbols—the result is often an organically evolved public realm with a distinctly local character.

Transitional spaces in Cebu City's low-rise housing developments must be understood not as residual or leftover areas, but as intentional, flexible, and socially generative zones. These spaces function as the "social infrastructure" that sustains everyday life and collective well-being. Designing with this understanding can transform generic housing blocks into resilient, culturally embedded, and socially dynamic neighborhoods.

4. Community Interaction and Cultural Considerations

Community interaction within low-rise row housing environments is not only a matter of physical proximity—it is profoundly shaped by the socio-cultural values, practices, and spatial habits of its residents. In Cebu City, as in much of the Philippines, neighborhood life is governed as much by informal social codes as by formal urban design. Understanding these cultural considerations is essential for comprehending how transitional spaces function beyond their physical dimensions, acting as the stage upon which everyday social dramas unfold.

Central to Filipino social life are the intertwined concepts of *pakikipagkapwa* (shared personhood), *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relations), and *bayanihan* (communal unity or collective cooperation). These values are manifested not just in interpersonal behavior but in spatial practices—how people extend their homes, share resources, and claim semi-public spaces for personal or collective use. In low-rise row housing, the lines between private and public are fluid, negotiated daily through subtle cues, shared understandings, and informal conventions.

In Cebu's housing communities, transitional zones such as front yards, doorsteps, and alleys often become **semi-domestic extensions** of the home. Families prepare food outdoors, children use alleys as playgrounds, and neighbors hold evening conversations while seated on makeshift benches or low stools. These behaviors are not anomalies—they are expressions of a cultural disposition toward collective visibility and shared experience, shaped over generations in densely populated barangays and reinforced by socio-economic necessity.

This spatial-social dynamic is evident in several recent low-rise row housing developments in Cebu. The table below synthesizes field-based observations from selected housing projects to illustrate how different physical characteristics of transitional spaces correlate with social interaction and resident-driven modifications.

Table 1. Transitional Space Features and Community Behavior in Selected Cebu Housing Projects

Housing Project	Alley/Front Yard Width (m)	Presence of Defined Shared Space	Observed Social Interaction	Informal Modifications by Residents
GK Village A	1.5	Yes (central courtyard)	High – daily gatherings, shared childcare	Benches, potted gardens, shared cooking areas
HfHP Site B	1.2	No – linear unit row	Moderate – mostly doorstep greetings	Laundry lines, added shade with tarpaulins
NGO Project C	2.0	Yes (open-ended alley)	High – children play zones, informal shops	Sari-sari stores, extended eaves, community shrine
Resettlement	1.0	No – minimal space	Low – limited	Trash bins placed in

Site D		between units	neighbor interaction	alleys, makeshift fences

The table reinforces the qualitative insight that both spatial dimensions and cultural adaptability are key to fostering meaningful social interaction. When physical layouts provide flexibility and residents are allowed to personalize space, the result is a vibrant, interactive, and resilient community. Conversely, rigid layouts without communal nodes or adequate spatial buffers tend to inhibit the formation of social bonds, despite residents' willingness to engage.

Social surveillance and informal governance in these communities are facilitated by spatial openness. A grandmother sitting on her front step not only interacts with passersby but keeps watch over children, visitors, and events in the alley—enforcing norms without formal authority. These networks of informal accountability and shared oversight are especially vital in low-income or post-resettlement contexts, where institutional presence is weak and mutual trust becomes the glue that holds the community together.

Ritual and religion play a key role in how space is inhabited and valued. In many Cebuano neighborhoods, small shrines or altars are placed at thresholds, while seasonal festivals are celebrated in shared yards or alleys. These moments of collective participation further strengthen spatial memory and cultural continuity, embedding deeper layers of meaning into otherwise generic housing environments.

In sum, transitional spaces in Cebu City's low-rise row housing are not passive containers but active participants in community life. Their role in shaping interaction is inseparable from the cultural frameworks within which they are embedded. Designing with this cultural lens requires more than physical specifications—it demands attentiveness to how people live, adapt, and perform social belonging in space. Only through such an integrated approach can housing environments evolve into truly inclusive, resilient, and culturally grounded communities.

5. Challenges and Policy Implications

Despite the demonstrated importance of transitional spaces in promoting neighborhood interaction and socio-spatial resilience, multiple structural and institutional challenges persist in the design and governance of low-rise row housing in Cebu City. These challenges are not merely technical but are deeply embedded in the political economy of urban development, the bureaucratic cultures of planning agencies, and the often conflicting agendas of stakeholders involved in the production of housing for the urban poor.

One of the primary obstacles is the dominance of a quantity-over-quality mindset in housing delivery. Government programs—especially those focused on post-disaster resettlement or socialized housing—tend to measure success through the number of units produced, rather than the long-term social sustainability of the communities formed. This results in standardized layouts with minimal regard for site-specific cultural practices, microclimatic conditions, or the spatial needs of social interaction. As a consequence, transitional spaces are often underdimensioned, poorly located, or entirely absent, reducing them to lifeless corridors or residual strips between houses (Salang, 2020).

Compounding this issue is the fragmentation of policy frameworks governing urban housing and design. While national agencies such as the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB) set minimum technical standards, these do not adequately account for social design parameters, such as the inclusion of communal gathering spaces or spatial flexibility for resident-led modifications. At the local level, comprehensive land use plans (CLUPs) and zoning ordinances often prioritize land efficiency and infrastructure over community cohesion. Without integrative guidelines that connect physical planning with social outcomes, even well-intentioned developments can fall short of fostering vibrant neighborhoods.

Another significant challenge is the limited participation of residents in the design process. Although NGOs like Gawad Kalinga promote participatory construction models, government-led and PPP (public-private partnership) projects often operate on top-down templates. Residents are frequently brought into the process after the critical spatial decisions have already been made. This lack of early

engagement not only alienates communities from their built environment but also undermines opportunities to embed vernacular knowledge and cultural nuances into spatial design. In Cebu City, where informal spatial practices—such as extending the home into the alleyway or transforming the front yard into a semi-public space—are central to daily life, ignoring such inputs leads to sterile and disconnected environments.

Equally problematic is the encroachment of neoliberal urbanization principles, which treat housing more as a commodity than a right or social good. As Sevilla (2023) points out, recent housing efforts in Cebu have been shaped by private-sector logics of return on investment, which favor compact, high-density models over culturally sensitive, interaction-friendly layouts (Sevilla, 2023). While this may increase the speed and scale of housing delivery, it often sidelines the need for transitional zones that facilitate long-term social sustainability.

In light of these challenges, there is an urgent need for a policy reorientation that recognizes the social and cultural dimensions of housing space. Transitional zones should be formally acknowledged as essential components of site planning, with design standards that mandate their inclusion, contextual adaptation, and flexibility for personalization. Urban policy must move beyond unit counts and cost-efficiency to include qualitative metrics such as social interaction indices, resident satisfaction, and long-term community health.

Inter-agency coordination must be strengthened to ensure that design and planning frameworks are not only technically sound but socially responsive. This means integrating housing policy with social welfare, health, and education policies to create a truly holistic approach to community building. Local governments, as the front-liners of urban management, should be empowered with technical capacity and participatory tools to engage residents meaningfully from the beginning of the design process.

Capacity-building for planners, architects, and engineers is essential. Professionals must be trained not just in spatial optimization and structural codes, but in socio-spatial dynamics, participatory design methods, and cultural sensitivity. Architectural education in the Philippines must evolve to include modules on informal urbanism, ethnographic methods, and human-centered design. Only then can we bridge the gap between spatial form and social function.

While the potential of transitional spaces in Cebu City's low-rise row housing is immense, it remains unrealized due to systemic policy gaps, design rigidities, and institutional inertia. By rethinking housing not merely as infrastructure but as a social ecosystem, and by foregrounding transitional spaces as critical links in that ecosystem, policy and planning can shift toward a more inclusive, resilient, and culturally rooted model of urban development.

6. Conclusion

Transitional spaces, though often overlooked in the design of low-rise row housing, play a foundational role in shaping the social ecology of neighborhoods. As this study has illustrated, these in-between zones are far more than architectural afterthoughts—they are the connective tissue that sustains everyday interactions, nurtures community cohesion, and embeds cultural practices into the built environment. In Cebu City, where the interplay between formal planning and informal spatial appropriation is especially pronounced, the careful articulation of transitional spaces can mean the difference between sterile housing blocks and thriving neighborhoods.

Throughout this essay, we have seen that when transitional spaces are designed with intentionality—through spatial permeability, physical accessibility, and cultural sensitivity—they become catalysts for mutual support, informal governance, and intergenerational engagement. The physical configurations of these spaces, from linear front yards and alley corridors to shared courtyard clusters, profoundly influence how residents see, meet, and relate to each other. More importantly, these spaces serve as stages for enacting core Filipino values such as *pakikisama* and *bayanihan*, allowing for the preservation of social customs even within modern, standardized housing layouts.

However, the widespread potential of these spaces is undermined by systemic design and policy shortcomings. Housing projects often prioritize density metrics and delivery speed over cultural integration and community formation. As shown in field observations and supported by research, developments that

ignore the social function of space tend to experience weaker neighbor ties, reduced collective care, and a lack of local identity. Conversely, those that afford room for personalization and social life—even within small footprints—tend to cultivate more vibrant, resilient, and secure environments.

The implications for urban policy, housing design, and planning education are profound. First, transitional spaces must be redefined not as excess land but as *essential social infrastructure*. This reframing should inform national housing standards, design briefs, and local zoning codes, ensuring that every project includes spatial allocations for informal gathering, neighbor interaction, and cultural expression. Second, planning processes must become more participatory and ethnographic—engaging future residents early to uncover their spatial habits, cultural norms, and aspirations. This would enable more context-responsive and socially embedded design outcomes.

A cultural shift in the professional mindset is needed. Architects, urban planners, and housing agencies must be trained to see space not just in terms of physical measurements but in terms of human behavior, social potential, and emotional resonance. In particular, educational institutions must update their curricula to equip professionals with tools for understanding the informal, the everyday, and the relational dimensions of space-making.

Future research should deepen its inquiry into the longitudinal impact of transitional space design on neighborhood outcomes—such as safety, mental health, youth development, and civic participation. Comparative studies across cities or regions within the Philippines could also help identify adaptable typologies and best practices for different urban contexts. Likewise, the integration of spatial technologies—like GIS mapping, community co-design apps, and post-occupancy analytics—could help in both planning and evaluating the effectiveness of transitional space interventions.

The success of low-rise row housing in cities like Cebu cannot be measured solely by shelter provision. True success lies in creating places that foster human connection, cultural continuity, and collective resilience. Transitional spaces, if thoughtfully designed and institutionally supported, can be the fulcrum upon which these aspirations pivot—bridging not only the private

and the public, but the personal and the collective, the physical and the emotional, the designed and the lived.

References

Du, J., & Greiving, S. (2020). Reclaiming on-site upgrading as a viable resilience strategy: Viabilities and scenarios through the lens of disaster-prone informal settlements in Metro Manila. *Sustainability, 12*(24), 10600.

Geldin, S. (2022). Rethinking the heavy hand of flood prevention in informal settlements: An investigation of retreat-related practices in the Philippines [Doctoral dissertation, University of California]. ProQuest.

Magno-Ballesteros, M., Rodil, A. S., & Ramos, T. P. (2024). Formulation of an assessment tool on basic service-level standards for resettlement projects. Discussion Papers.

Marshall, R. D. (1977). *Building to resist the effect of wind: In five volumes. Overview. Volume 1.* U.S. Department of Commerce.

McGee, T. G., & Robinson, I. M. (1995). *The mega-urban regions of Southeast Asia.* University of British Columbia Press. https://books.google.com/books?id=BOHsEzpJhx4C

McGee, T. G. (1995). Metrofitting the emerging mega-urban regions of ASEAN: An overview. In I. M. Robinson & T. G. McGee (Eds.), *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia* (pp. 65–92). UBC Press.

Mörnhed, E., & Gehander, M. (2008). From slum to adequate shelter: A study on housing solutions for the urban poor in Manila, Philippines [Bachelor's thesis, Lund University]. Lund University Student Papers.

Nicolin, R. (2007). Centro Migrante: Self-help housing community for transient seafarers in Manila [Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. MIT DSpace.

Ostojic, D. R., Bose, R. K., Krambeck, H., Lim, J., & Zhang, Y. (2013). Energizing green cities in Southeast Asia: Applying sustainable urban energy and emissions planning. World Bank.

Sajor, E. E. (2016). Peri-urbanization and environmental issues in mega-urban regions. In B. Roberts & T. Kanaley (Eds.), *Urbanization and sustainability in Asia: Good practice approaches in urban region*

development (pp. 309–326). Routledge.

Salang, E. T. D. (2020). Study on the housing resettlement for disaster-affected communities of Tacloban and Cebu, Philippines [Master's thesis, University of San Pedro]. University of San Pedro Repository.

Sevilla, R. C. (2023). Neoliberal urbanization in a secondary city: The case of Cebu City. *Urban Development Review.*